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RECENT ATTACKS HAVE PUT THE MILITARY JUNTA UNDER PRESSURE.



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WEST AFRICA OFFICE



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The 25 April attacks by Tuareg rebels from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) mark a turning point in Mali's history. The coming months could determine whether this vast West African country falls apart.

For the first time, the newly allied Tuareg and jihadist forces managed to launch simultaneous attacks on the Malian army at a range of locations spread throughout the country. These attacks struck at the heart of the military junta. The 20,000-strong armed forces killed Malian Defence Minister Sadio Camara, the second-most powerful man in the junta. Camara, a widely popular figure, was a close confidant of the junta's leader, **Assimi Goïta**.

The rebels also conquered the northern Malian city of Kidal. This loss weighs heavily on the Malian military, which was

only able to retake the city in 2023 with help from the **Russian Africa Corps**, the successor of the Wagner Group. That victory held great symbolic value, as the coup government had only recently expelled the French from the country, partly on the grounds that they were unable to guarantee domestic security.

Since the 25 April attacks, the question remains whether the loss of Kidal could undermine support for the military within Malian society, which initially harboured considerable sympathy for the rulers in uniform.

THE EMIR OF THE JIHADISTS

At the forefront of efforts to topple the military regime in Bamako has been the jihadist leader Iyad Ag Ghali, a member of the Tuareg ethnic group from the country's north. Since the 1980s, he had been involved in several Tuareg rebellions, as part of the Tuareg's fight for independence in response to marginalization by the Malian government in Bamako. In 2012, he founded his own group called Ansar Dine (Defenders of Islam). Like other leaders of jihadist groups operating not only in Mali but also in the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger, he shifted from Tuareg separatist to Islamist.

That same year, Ansar Dine seized the desert city of Timbuktu. Ag Ghali's men then raised the Islamists' black flag and imposed Sharia law on the city. Since Ag Ghali's

campaign was directed against the Sufi Islam traditionally practiced in the region, which he seeks to replace with the stricter school of Salafism, his fighters went as far as destroying Islamic shrines in the city. In response to the killing of captured Malian army soldiers, the International Criminal Court later issued an arrest warrant for Ag Ghali.

“ BOTH LEADERS WANT TO TRANSFORM THE COUNTRY INTO AN ISLAMIC REPUBLIC. MAURITANIA OR SYRIA COULD SERVE AS MODELS FOR AN ‘ISLAMIC CALIPHATE’ IN MALI.”

Following the fall of Timbuktu, France, the nation’s former colonial ruler, launched Operation Serval. Initially, the French army managed to push back the Tuareg rebels and the jihadists. However, only a few years later, Ag Ghali and Ansar Dine joined forces with other armed groups to form JNIM, a group that is closely affiliated with Al Qaeda. Active in the Sahel since the 1990s, the international terrorist network secured enough financial

resources to continue the fight by carrying out attacks and, above all, kidnapping Western tourists — for whom they evidently received ransom payments from Western states.

Since JNIM’s founding, Ag Ghali has been a leading adversary of the government in Bamako. At first, he led the fight against the democratically elected government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Even the French troops

and the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA were unable to counter the jihadists’ guerrilla tactics, as they operated in small, mobile units often equipped with motorcycles and pickup trucks.

After the fall of the Keïta government in 2020 and the second coup that followed just a year later, military strongman Assimi Goïta emerged as Mali’s de facto leader. JNIM has been fighting the military junta ever since.

■ ON THE ROAD TO A CALIPHATE?

Ag Ghali also formed an alliance with Amadou Kouffa, who was responsible for founding the terrorist group Katina Macina in central Mali. Kouffa belongs to the Fula people, an ethnic group and significant minority in many parts of West Africa that has been repeatedly persecuted throughout the region’s history. Like Ag Ghali, Kouffa embraced the Salafist interpretation of Islam, in part because of the time he had spent in Saudi Arabia. And like Ag Ghali, Kouffa, a former traveling preacher, sought to Islamize the region.

However, Khouffa had temporarily joined the terrorist group Islamic State, which also operated in West Africa, leading to repeated bloody clashes among the jihadists. Khouffa's alliance with Ag Ghali has significantly weakened ISIS's influence in Mali.

Both leaders want to transform the country into an Islamic republic. Mauritania or Syria could serve as models for an "Islamic caliphate" in Mali. Still, beyond the implementation of Sharia law, their envisioned political order remains unclear. So far, their focus has been on distancing themselves from the old secular, postcolonial state, which is deeply unpopular due to mismanagement, corruption, and poverty.

“Austerity and privatization have eroded the already weak postcolonial state by transferring its responsibilities in key areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure to large international development agencies, NGOs, and private companies.”

The structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank contributed to the demise of the old Malian state, which the military under Goïta — much like the allied juntas in [Burkina Faso](#) and [Niger](#) — claims it wishes to transform. Their demands for austerity and privatization have eroded the already weak postcolonial state by transferring its responsibilities in key areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure to large international development agencies, NGOs, and private companies. This has led the state to retreat even further, thereby undermining its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens.

This situation was all the more devastating because it occurred against the backdrop of a prolonged economic crisis that began with the great Sahel drought of the 1970s and has grown increasingly severe to this day, not least because of the effects of global warming.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

Another important leader is the influential imam Mahmoud Dicko, who has previously mediated between the Keïta government and the JNIM jihadists. Dicko adheres to the Salafist school of Islam

and, for many years, served as chairman of the country's High Islamic Council, which had previously been led by traditional leaders who did not interfere in politics and rejected Saudi Salafism.

Dicko had previously called for protests against the Keïta government, but was forced to leave the country after the military coup. Since then, he has been living in exile in neighbouring Algeria.

Analysts view this still influential Islamic cleric as a potential leader for the post-military era, should the people of Bamako rise up against Goïta. However, such an uprising does not appear likely at this time, in part because the military government has banned civil society groups linked to Dicko.

At the moment, it seems more likely that the military struggle for control of the country will continue to intensify.

The aforementioned kidnapping of expats — professionals working internationally — to extort ransom money still contributes to financing jihadism. In October 2025, the jihadists scored a major coup with an attack on the Sanankoroba farm near Bamako. The farm belongs to Sheikh Ahmed bin Maktoum Al Maktoum, a retired general from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and a member of Dubai's ruling family. A large ransom was reportedly paid for the release of two Emiratis, estimated to total some 70 million US dollars.

Many stories are circulating amid the tense atmosphere in the Sahel. Due to the ransom payments and the Emir of Dubai's direct negotiations with JNIM jihadists, the Emiratis have been accused of trying to exert influence in Mali. Some already foresee [a scenario like that in Sudan](#), where external regional powers, including the UAE, are fuelling the conflict. However, it seems unlikely that the Emiratis would exert influence in favour of JNIM, given that Dubai has traditionally been hostile to Islamist forces.

“ THE PEOPLE OF MALI ARE LEFT TO FIGHT FOR THEIR COUNTRY’S FUTURE LARGELY ON THEIR OWN. ”

In contrast to Sudan or Yemen, external actors have so far played a minor role in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel. Even the roughly 2,500 Russian mercenaries

This could put the civilian population of 22 million — who had hoped that the Malian army and its Russian allies would bring peace — in a dangerous situation.

The jihadists in particular appear well prepared for further military escalation, which they have already signalled by imposing a blockade of the capital, Bamako. To finance its operations, the militia relies on widespread drugs and arms smuggling, as well as on levies it imposes on the extraction and trade of raw materials, particularly gold and lithium. In exchange for “security”, the jihadists extort protection money from miners, traders, and farmers.

present in the country are not playing a decisive role in the conflict, as shown by recent attacks in which the troops of the Africa Corps were defeated and forced

to retreat. The same goes for France, the former colonial power, which is viewed with great scepticism in Mali and across West Africa and does not want to embark on another military venture. And so the people of Mali are left to fight for their country's future largely on their own.

Europe's main concern should be on Malian civil society, which is currently in dire need of support. Beyond this, there is also the fight against global warming, which – quite apart from the power struggle within the country – will determine whether Mali remains habitable in a world that could soon be two or even three degrees warmer.

[Translated by Andrea Garcés and Louise Pain for Gegensatz Translation Collective]

